

Putting “Women Are Deficient In Their Intellect” In Its Proper Context

[Adapted from articles by Shamshad.M.Khan and Dr. Sherif Abdel Azeem]
Call To Islam Research

Introduction

Using cut and paste statements, and ignoring the context in which statements were made the recent ‘Dispatches’ documentary was full of lies and half truths. The aim of the programme was to sensationalise Islam and demonise the callers to Islam. No doubt this is excellent for improving viewing figures, but not so good for a balanced discussion about Islam. This article will explain in some detail the meaning behind one of the statements made by our brother Abū Usaamah.

They quoted Abū Usaamah as saying: “women are deficient in their intellect..” This is in fact a statement of the Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu alayhi wa sallam) which when understood in its proper context, is in no way demeaning to women.

The following is a collection of statements from leading psychologists and scientists’ regarding aspects of a woman’s nature which have been decreed by Allaah the Most High. By understanding the innate differences between men and women, a husband should be more understanding towards his wife. If we overlook these differences, it will lead to frustration and conflict between spouses.

A second article will highlight the Jewish and Christian views of women. ‘Despatches’ would do well to attend an orthodox synagogue to listen to the daily prayer made:

Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile. Praised be God that he has not created me a woman. Praised be God that he has not created me an ignoramus.¹

Statements from leading practitioners

Pre Menstrual Syndrome.

Psychiatry in Practice, April 1983 issue states:

"Forty percent of women suffer from pre-menstrual syndrome in some form and one in four women have their lives severely disrupted by it. Dr Jill Williams, general practitioner from Bury, gives guidelines on how to recognise patients at risk and suggests a suitable treatment." [Psychiatry in Practice, April 1993, p.14]

In the same issue, George Beaumont reporting on the workshop held at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in London on pre-menstrual syndrome, says:

"Some authorities would argue that 80 percent of women have some degree of breast and abdominal discomfort which is pre-menstrual but that only about 10 percent complain to their doctors - and then only because of ... **mental depression...** Other authorities have suggested that pre-menstrual syndrome is

¹ Leonard J. Swidler, Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1976) pp. 80-81

a new problem, regular ovulation for 20 years or more being a phenomenon caused by 'civilisation', 'medical progress', and an altered concept of the role of women." [Psychiatry in Practice, April 1993, p.18]

In its examination of the occurrence of physical and psychological change during the period just prior to the onset of menstruation we read in Psychological Medicine:

"Many studies have reported an increased likelihood of various **negative affects** during the pre-menstrual period. In this affective category are many emotional designations including **irritability, depression, tension, anxiety, sadness, insecurity, lethargy, loneliness, tearfulness, fatigue, restlessness and changes of mood**. In the majority of studies, investigators have found it difficult to distinguish between various negative affects, and only a few have allowed themselves to be excessively concerned with the differences which might or might not exist between affective symptoms." [Psychological Medicine, Monograph Supplement 4, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p.6]

In the same article dealing with pre-menstrual behavioural changes we read:

"A significant relationship between the pre-menstrual phase of the cycle and a variety of specific and defined forms of behaviour has been reported in a number of studies. For the purpose of their review, these forms of behaviour have been grouped under the headings of **aggressive behaviour, illness behaviour and accidents.**" [Psychological Medicine, Monograph Supplement 4, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p.7]

The lengthy review portrays how female behaviour is affected in these situations. In 'The Pre-menstrual Syndrome', C. Shreeves writes:

"Reduced powers of concentration and memory are familiar aspects of the pre-menstrual syndrome."

This does not mean, of course, that women are mentally deficient absolutely. It just means that their **mental faculties can become affected** at certain times in the biological cycle. Shreeves also writes:

"As many as 80 percent of women are aware of some degree of pre-menstrual changes, 40 percent are substantially **disturbed by them**, and between 10 and 20 percent are **seriously disabled as a result** of the syndrome."

Furthermore, women face the problem of ante-natal and post-natal depression, both of which cause extreme cycles of depression in some cases. Again, these recurring symptoms naturally affect the mind, giving rise to drowsiness and dopey memory.

Pregnancy

On the subject of pregnancy in Psychiatry in Practice, October-November 1986, we learn that:

"In an experiment 'Cox' found that 16 percent of a sample of 263 pregnant women were suffering from **clinically significant psychiatric problems**. Eight percent had a depressive neurosis and 1.9 percent had phobic neurosis. This study showed that the proportion of pregnant women with psychiatric problems was greater than that found in the control group but the difference only tended towards significance." [Psychiatry in Practice, October-November, 1986, p.6]

Post-natal depression

Regarding the symptoms during the post-natal cycle Dr. Ruth Sagovsky writes:

"The third category of puerperal psychiatric problems is post-natal depression. It is generally agreed that between 10 to 15 percent of women become clinically depressed after childbirth. These mothers experience a variety of symptoms but anxiety, especially over the baby, irritability, and excessive fatigue are common. Appetite is usually decreased and often there are considerable sleep difficulties. The mothers lose interest in the things they enjoyed prior to the baby's birth, and find that their concentration is impaired. They often feel irrational guilt, and blame themselves for being 'bad' wives and mothers. Fifty percent of these women are not identified as having a depressive illness. Unfortunately, many of them do not understand what ails them and blame their husbands, their babies or themselves until the relationships are strained to an alarming degree." [Psychiatry in Practice, May, 1987, p.18]

Menopause

There is a need to study the effects of the menopause about which very little is known even to this day. This phase in a woman's life can start at any time from the mid-thirties to the mid-fifties and can last for as long as 15 years.

Writing about the pre-menopausal years, C.B. Ballinger states:

"Several of the community surveys indicate a small but significant increase in psychiatric symptoms in women during the five years prior to the cessation of menstrual periods... The most obvious clinical feature of this transitional phase of menstrual function is the alteration in menstrual pattern, the menstrual cycle becoming shorter with age, and variability in cycle length become very prominent just prior to the cessation of menstruation. Menorrhagia is a common complaint at this time, and is associated with higher than normal levels of psychiatric disturbance." [Psychiatry in Practice, November, 1987, p.26]

On the phenomenon of menopause in an article in Newsweek International, May 25th 1992, Dr. Jennifer al-Knopf, Director of the Sex and Marital Therapy Programme of North-western University writes:

" ... Women never know what their body is doing to them ... **some reporting debilitating symptoms from hot flushes to night sweat, sleeplessness, irritability, mood swings, short term memory loss,** migraine, headaches, urinary inconstance and weight gain. Most such problems can be traced to the drop-off in the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone, both of which govern the ovarian cycle. But every woman starts with a different level of hormones and loses them at different rates. The unpredictability is one of the most upsetting aspects. Women never know what their body is going to do to them..."

Infertility and Miscarriage.

Then there are the psychiatric aspects of infertility and miscarriage. On the subject of infertility, Dr. Ruth Sagovsky writes:

"Depression, anger and guilt are common reactions to bereavement. In infertility there is the added pain of there being nobody to grieve for. Families and friends may contribute to the feeling of isolation by passing insensitive comments. The

gynaecologist and GPs have to try to help these couples against a backdrop of considerable distress." [Psychiatry in Practice, Winter, 1989, p.16]

On the subject of miscarriage the above article continues:

Miscarriage can at times have profound psychological impact and it is important that those women affected receive the support they need. Approximately one-fifth of all pregnancies end in spontaneous abortion and the effects are poorly recognised. If however, the miscarriage occurs in the context of infertility, the emotional reaction may be severe. The level of grief will depend on the meaning of pregnancy to the couple." [Psychiatry in Practice, Winter, 1989, p.17]

Emotional differences between men and women

Also, the fact that women are known to be more sensitive and emotional than men must not be overlooked. It is well known, for example, **that under identical circumstances women suffer much greater anxiety than men.** Numerous medical references on this aspect of female behaviour can be given but to quote as a specimen, we read in 'Sex Differences in Mental Health' that:

"Surveys have found different correlates of anxiety and neuroticism in the two sexes. Women and men do not become equally upset by the same things, and being upset does not have the same effect in men as in women. Ekehammar (1974; Ekehammar, Magnusson and Ricklander, 1974) using data from 116 sixteen-year-olds, did a factor analysis on self-reported anxiety. Of the eighteen different responses indicating anxiety (sweating palms, faster heart rate, and so on) females reported experiencing twelve of them significantly more often than males. Of the anxiety-producing situations studied, females reported experiencing significantly more anxiety than males reported in fourteen of them." [Katherine Blick Hoyenga and Kermit T. Hoyenga in Sex Differences in Mental Health, p.336]

It is in light of the above findings of psychologist, psychiatrists and researchers that the saying of the Prophet (salalahu alaihi wa sallam) is understood. He (salalahu alaihi wa sallam) asked:

"Isn't the witness of a woman equal to half of that of a man?" The women said, "Yes." He said, **"This is because of the deficiency of a woman's mind."** (Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 3, Book 48, Number 826)

The Dispatches programme tried to show that the "extremist Muslims" (according to their false definition) had an intolerant world view, unlike their "moderate" sufi friends. However the statements that these "extremist Muslims" made were taken directly from the Prophet (salalahu alaihi wa sallam) himself. Hence the statements made regarding women, hijab, prayer of a child, the age of marriage, jihad, prohibition of homosexuality, etc were from the religion of Islam, and were not the personal view of these speakers. Hence by attacking these views, the programme attacked Islam. Secondly, the programme did not provide a full opportunity for Muslims to explain the reason behind these Islamic injunctions.

How Islam views women

One must also bear in mind that forgetfulness can be an asset. A woman has to put up with children presenting all kinds of emotional problems and a woman is certainly known to be more resilient than man. The aim of presenting the above research findings on a number of aspects related with the theme is to indicate that a woman by her biological constitution faces such problems. It does not

however make her inferior to man but it does illustrate that she is different. Viewed in this way, it can only lead one to the conclusion that Allaah knows His creation the best and has prescribed precise laws in keeping with the nature of humankind. Allaah, the Creator is All-Knowing and man (or the disbeliever in Allaah and the final, perfected, revealed way of life) is - as usual - either ignorant and arrogant.

The Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) was neither a psychologist nor a psychiatrist. Rather, he merely conveyed the truth that was revealed to him. He stated:

"Treat your women kindly. The woman has been created from a rib, and the most curved part of a rib is its upper region. If you try to straighten it you will break it, and if you leave it as it is, it will remain curved. So treat women kindly."

And in another narration: "If you try to straighten her you will break her and breaking her means divorce." [Reported by al-Bukhârî and Muslim]. This is very important advice for the man - for him to have patience and not to try to 'reform' the behavioural pattern of the woman during these times i.e. 'to straighten her'. He will not be able to do that, as it is biological in origin. Instead, he should maintain and protect his relationship with her by showing kindness.

A Woman's Testimony in Christian and Jewish scriptures

Women were not allowed to bear witness at all in early Jewish society.² The Rabbis counted women's not being able to bear witness among the nine curses inflicted upon all women because of the Fall (see the "Eve's Legacy" section).³ Women in today's Israel are not allowed to give evidence in Rabbinical courts.³ The Rabbis justify why women cannot bear witness by citing Genesis 18:9-16, where it is stated that Sara, Abraham's wife had lied. The Rabbis use this incident as evidence that women are unqualified to bear witness. It should be noted here that this story narrated in Genesis 18:9-16 has been mentioned more than once in the Qur'aan without any hint of any lies by Sara (Quran 11:69-74, 51:24-30). In the Christian West, both ecclesiastical and civil law debarred women from giving testimony until late last century.⁴

If a man accuses his wife of unchastity, her testimony will not be considered at all according to the Bible. The accused wife has to be subjected to a trial by ordeal.

In this trial, the wife faces a complex and humiliating ritual which was supposed to prove her guilt or innocence (Num. 5:11-31). If she is found guilty after this ordeal, she will be sentenced to death. If she is found not guilty, her husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing.

Besides, if a man takes a woman as a wife and then accuses her of not being a virgin, her own testimony will not count. Her parents had to bring evidence of her virginity before the elders of the town. If the parents could not prove the innocence of their daughter, she would be stoned to death on her father's doorsteps. If the parents were able to prove her innocence, the husband would

² Leonard J. Swidler, *Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1976) p. 115.

³ Lesley Hazleton, *Israeli Women The Reality Behind the Myths* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977) p. 41.

⁴ Matilda J. Gage, *Woman, Church, and State* (New York: Truth Seeker Company, 1893) p. 142

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only be fined one hundred shekels of silver and he could not divorce his wife as long as he lived: The Bible states:

"If a man takes a wife and, after lying with her, dislikes her and slanders her and gives her a bad name, saying, 'I married this woman, but when I approached her, I did not find proof of her virginity,' then the girl's father and mother shall bring proof that she was a virgin to the town elders at the gate. The girl's father will say to the elders, 'I gave my daughter in marriage to this man, but he dislikes her. Now he has slandered her and said I did not find your daughter to be a virgin. But here is the proof of my daughter's virginity.' Then her parents shall display the cloth before the elders of the town, and the elders shall take the man and punish him. They shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give them to the girl's father, because this man has given an Israelite virgin a bad name. She shall continue to be his wife; he must not divorce her as long as he lives. If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of the town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you." (Deuteronomy 22:13-21)

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